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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA AND THE DUMA ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason: 1.4 (d).

11. (C) Summary: With Putin's decision to back United Russia in the Duma race, the prospect, faintly entertained about one year ago of creating something like a real political party system has completely disappeared, and United Russia has become a vehicle for Putin's aspirations to remain influential after he leaves office in 2008. United Russia's change in status: from the party of power to a means to Putin's end, has caused anxiety in the party, which remains a collection of political heavyweights who have in common little beyond their interest in continued power. Their fear that the Russian voter may not share that interest has produced insecurity and with it a rough campaign that, in its efforts to guarantee a constitutional majority for the party and a mandate for the President, is willing to step on the knuckles of anyone who gets in the way. End summary.

Putin's Decision Changes All  
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12. (C) United Russia's orderly march to a constitutional majority in the December 2 Duma elections turned into a scramble to provide a mandate for Putin with the President's October 1 decision to head the party's list. With Putin's announcement, United Russia went from being the party of power in the election campaign to a bit player in the continuing drama of what Putin will do when he leaves office next year.

13. (C) The campaign has been tough on Just Russia, SPS, and to a lesser extent the Communists, but it has been bruising for United Russia as well. The party lost some of its luster when Putin in Krasnoyarsk described it as filled with opportunists. United Russia, Putin said, is an imperfect tool, but the "best available" for continuing his legacy. Putin's public criticism, which he repeated at the Luzhniki rally, made United Russia fair game for other parties as well. Their attacks and United Russia's need to take a back-seat to Putin, have left the party looking less like a high-flying collection of elite politicians and more like the parties it is competing with as voters go to the polls on December 2.

The Party Struggles  
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14. (C) Adding to the strains on United Russia has been the need to coopt or preempt those eager to compete for the task of being indispensable to Putin as he searches for a way to remain influential after his presidency. In response to "spontaneous" meetings around the country calling for Putin to either remain for a third term or become Russia's "national leader," and weekly invitations to Putin from Just Russia's Mironov to remain President as long as he wants, United Russia on November 6 floated a national leader project of its own. It also followed the Tver congress of citizens

agitating for Putin as national leader with a similar party rally at Luzhniki. Although United Russia, after negative media reactions, distanced itself from party member Abdul-Khakim Sultygov's national leader proposal, the party's Presidium and Higher Council adopted a resolution to "preserve for Putin the status of national leader."

15. (C) Tension inside United Russia has been increased by persistent rumors of a purge should Putin want to head the party at some point after the Duma elections. Putin's public criticisms of United Russia have only heightened that anxiety. At a minimum, Putin's entry into the race has been jarring for politicians like United Russia Chairman Gryzlov, who has had to take a back-seat to Putin in party matters and who now heads United Russia's list in St. Petersburg instead of the federal troika. Gryzlov is not by temperament as slavishly loyal to Putin as Just Russia Chairman Sergey Mironov, and the last two months could not have been easy on him.

16. (C) United Russia has also been struggling to provide an electoral mandate for Putin. Until the President began actively campaigning on November 13 in Krasnoyarsk, United Russia's ratings had stagnated. On November 6, Presidential Administration Deputy Vladislav Surkov in a closed meeting reportedly criticized United Russia for expecting Putin to win the mandate for them. Surkov allegedly told the United Russia candidates to spend more time campaigning in their districts, less time waiting to uncork the champagne. In spite of United Russia's monopoly on the media, near-limitless administrative resources, a campaign team that includes virtually all of the nation's governors, and the leadership of a genuinely popular President, the requirement that it produce a mandate for Putin has been an additional source of strain. Creating tension as well, no doubt, has

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been the possibility that administrative resources may have to be finessed in order to push the Kremlin's stepchild, Just Russia, over the seven-percent threshold.

17. (C) United Russia's internal polling may also show that the deck that has been stacked in its favor may be producing a protest vote in that part of the country --urban areas-- where results are less subject to administrative control. Fear of a statistically-significant protest vote may account for the hysterical tone of some of the campaigning, as well as for the search for an "enemy" --internal or external-- against whom the Russian voter is being asked to unify.

18. (C) One index of the Kremlin's anxiety on that score may have been Vyacheslav Nikonov's November 29 Izvestiya article, "Election Uncertainties for Putin and United Russia," which was perhaps commissioned to help manage expectations on the eve of the election. Nikonov argues that "When a party holds a secure lead in the polls for a long time, the electorate become complacent." Later in the article, he speculates that heavy-handed tactics in the regions may "turn people off from voting for United Russia." Nikonov also follows others in United Russia and the Kremlin in low-balling a mandate for Putin at a mere sixty percent of the vote.

#### The Party List

19. (U) United Russia itself remains less a unified political party than, according to Institute for Strategic Assessments President Aleksandr Konovalov, "a group of ambitious bureaucrats who more often than not hate each other." Director of the Foundation for the Development of Information Politics Aleksandr Kynev described United Russia as a "Noah's Ark that influential national and regional clans sail from one Duma election to the next." The current party list seems to bear that out.

110. (C) By all accounts the composition of the list was the

subject of intense contention over the summer. The leadership reportedly struggled to accommodate the many powerful politicians who wanted to figure in the top half of the 600-member list, which under every election scenario will be guaranteed a place in the Duma. (If United Russia wins 66 percent of the vote, as some forecast, 371 of its candidates will become deputies.) It was also important to the party's fortunes that local heavyweights, governors for example, head United Russia's lists in their regions in order to draw voters to the party, although those "locomotives" will not serve in the Duma if elected. The United Russia list was in the end unveiled at its October 1 convention, and it was a virtual "who's who" of politics in Russia. Among the 600 candidates were 192 of the 303 deputies of the current United Russia Duma faction and 65 of the 84 current governors. Sixty-three of the governors head United Russia's regional lists while two --Aleksey Lebed of Khakasiya and Valentina Matvienko of St. Petersburg-- are number two in their regions. The list features four ministers: Agriculture's Gordeev, Deputy PM Zhukov, Natural Resources Minister Trutnev, and Minister for Emergencies Shoygu. Also on the list are at least 27 mayors and dozens of regional deputies.

Comment

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¶11. (C) United Russia is less than four years old. It emerged at the end of 2003 from the Fourth Congress of the "Unity and Fatherland" party. With 1,730,000 members in all regions of the country and virtually the entire nation's elite in its ranks, United Russia seemed poised before Putin's October 1 decision to continue creating a world in which, a la Gryzlov, "Parliament is not a place for discussions" and "marches are only festive." United Russia, according to Gryzlov, "defends the interests of those who don't need revolutions: financial, economic, cultural, political, orange, red, brown, or gay." Unfortunately, the complacent politics that Gryzlov longs for have collided with Putin's aspiration to re-configure the system in order to allow for his continued relevance. That collision may ultimately produce the world that Gryzlov wants, but there may be some bumps along the way.

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